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‘Deform[ing] Hercules’ in Wilkie Collins’s *Antonina*

Delphine Cadwallader-Bouron

1 Wilkie Collins published his second novel, *Antonina or the Fall of Rome*, in 1850.[2] It bears much in common with his very first novel, *Iolani*,[3] in terms of plot: a young woman who falls victim to patriarchal authority. It also displays a yearning for the exotic—Tahiti and its mysteries being replaced by fifth-century Rome. Two parallel and intertwining plots run through the novel. The first story line is the opposition between two brothers who embody the antagonisms of two fanatical sister religions, Christian Numerian and Pagan Ulpius; the latter vows to destroy Numerian and everything he stands for. The other subplot is the historical background itself, the siege of the Goths over decadent and starving Rome. Antonina is banned from her home by her father, who calls her a harlot after seeing her at night with lustful Senator Vetrino who breaks into her bedroom—with Ulpius’s help—and tries to rape her. She escapes from Rome just before the siege starts and falls under the protection of Goth warrior Hermanric, who loves her at first sight. Goisvintha, Hermanric’s sister, had sworn to have her personal revenge against Rome, the day her husband and all her children were slaughtered by Romans. She sees Antonina as the perfect victim to fulfill her goal—fill the helmet of her husband with an innocent Roman’s blood. Antonina is hidden by Hermanric who joins her every night in a house in the forest, but they are swiftly found out by a monstrous Hun, who obeys Goisvintha and kills Hermanric under Antonina’s eyes. She escapes yet again and is discovered erring by Ulpius. He had found a way out of Rome through a hole in the wall to offer Alaric, the Goth King, a way into the capital in exchange for the destruction of all the Christian churches. After being violently rejected and laughed at by Alaric, Ulpius creeps back into Rome with shocked and dumbstruck Antonina. They discover horrific scenes of death, disease and even cannibalism as Rome is slowly rotting in Mediterranean Italian heat, crushing under the weight of its own past vices and present famine.

2 Collins offers a terrifying vision of Ancient Rome and classical landscapes. Sensation and Gothic aestheticism: two altars on which young Collins sacrifices the Roman body.

Classical ideals of beauty are distorted, scarified, maimed and crushed to pieces to form the new—sensational—material on which Collins's later novels were based. The reader witnesses the slow transmutation of the Roman body as Collins gradually rids himself of the influence of his sources and his own voice emerges.

Depicting Rome: Collins's Inheritance

3 The choice of Rome as the main stage for Collins's budding imagination owes nothing to chance. It springs from Collins's desire to find a historical subject which helped him join the Pantheon of celebrated Victorian novelists, after the rejection by the publishers of his very first novel written five years previously. His classical subject, Rome on the eve of its downfall, is extremely well-documented and bears the influence of Gibbon[4] in many passages. His choice of the genre of the historical novel enables him to write in the wake of the great Walter Scott[5] and his choice of Italy as the setting for his tale would have been particularly evocative for a contemporary reader, most probably aware of the social unrest setting fire to the country[6]. Collins thus owes much to the Victorian representations of Ancient Rome, copying, as it were, visions of classical Italy which do not spring from his own creation. Some passages or some descriptions of Italian landscapes bear the signs of others'. They do not as such blend into Collins's text but appear as monstrous additions to an otherwise homogeneous text, altogether genetically alien to Collins's fictional world.

The Vestiges of Rome

4 The point of view of the archeologist or the historian opens the novel as Collins sets off to gather the fragments of a long-gone past with the help of serious sources:

> Here, the temporary path was entirely hidden by the incursions of a swollen torrent; there, it was faintly perceptible in occasional patches of soft ground, or partly traceable by fragments of abandoned armour, skeletons of horses and men, and remnants of the rude bridges which had once served for passage across a river or transit over a precipice (4).

5 The process used here is very frequent in *Antonina*: Collins fuses two images within the same depiction of a landscape—that of the ruins still observable by the educated Victorian stroller on his European tour and that of the images conjured up by Roman history. The scenery acts as a reminder to the reader of both present Italy and past Rome. Collins gives substance to his imagined characters and supports their existence by architectural and historical frame; his objective being to hide himself behind the respectability of History and the authors whose famous names are attached to it. He uses this technique several times, by accumulating rather than fusing together different representations, as he does when he describes Vetrino's palace:

> Slowly the tender daylight grew and brightened in its beauty, warmed the cold prostrate bodies in the silent hall, and dimmed the faint glow of the wasting lamp; no black mist of smoke, no red glare of devouring fire arose to quench its fair lustre; no roar of flames interrupted the murmuring morning tranquility of nature, or startled from their heavy repose the exhausted outcasts stretched upon the pavement of the street. Still the noble palace stood unshaken on its firm foundations; still the adornments of its porticoes and its statues glittered as of old in the rays of the rising sun (154).

6 If the style of this passage reminds the Victorian reader of Gibbon or Bulwer-Lytton[7], with the beauty of Roman architecture set against the decadence of the Romans, this passage, and in particular its treatment of light, is also evocative of William Collins's depictions of Italy. Collins's father was a member of the Royal Academy who died just after Wilkie had started writing *Antonina*. He therefore interrupted his novel to write his father's *Memoirs*[8] for which he received excellent criticism. Interestingly enough, Collins worked on his novel in his father's painting studio[9], still surrounded, if not by the actual paintings of Italy, at least by their memory. Some early passages of the novel are descriptions of paintings by Collins's father, which he also analyses in his *Memoirs*:

> At the time when the sun set, nothing could be more picturesque than the distant view of this joyous scene. The deep red rays of the departing luminary cast their radiance, partly from behind the church, over the vast multitude in the Place. Brightly and rapidly the rich light roved over the waters that leaped towards it from the fountain in all the loveliness of natural and evanescent form. Bathed in that brilliant glow, the smooth porphyry colonnades reflected, chameleon like, ethereal and varying hues; the white marble statues became suffused in a delicate rose-colour, and the sober-tinted trees gleamed in the innermost of their leafy depths as if steeped in the exhalations of a golden mist. While, contrasting strangely with the wondrous radiance around them, the huge bronze pine-tree in the middle of the Place, and the wide front of the basilica, rose up in gloomy shadow, indefinite and exaggerated, lowering like evil spirits over the joyous beauty of the rest of the scene, and casting their great depths of shade into the midst of the light whose dominion they despised (29).

7 As Catherine Peters has shown, Collins often uses the descriptions he made of his father's paintings to insist on the link between men and landscape[10]. The landscape Collins describes here, for instance, is typical of the pathetic fallacy pervading his father's representations of Italy: the townscape is steeped in changing colours, as if the ominous mood of the whole scene, "evil" and "despis[ing]", were imprinting itself physically on every tree or object.

The Weight of the Past

8 However, being faithful to one's sources, both historical and pictorial, has a price—a price Collins pays by sometimes yielding the least successful passages of his novel. Almost every beginning and end of his chapters in the first part of his novel is saturated with historical facts and dates which are rarely of any real interest at all: here opening a chapter on the whole history of "the Mount of Gardens" from ancient times to the Victorian age through the middle Ages (34), there offering the reader a lengthy digression on St Peter's Church in the year 324, over the ruins of Nero (79). Collins betrays a cautiousness typical of a young writer's, eager to please the more educated readers, and securing his path by borrowing the tone of other writers—or even his father's, especially in his 1838 notes on Italy while he was studying the landscape for his later Roman canvases[11]. The painter's voice, when describing Italian nature in a quivering light, is even audible in the startling use, throughout the novel, of the word "sublime". Collins Senior used this adjective recurrently in his notes[12], rendering the impression of a landscape suffused with human feeling. His Italian paintings are indeed laden with contrasts and a sense of vertigo which he strove to stage in his work on light. Collins Junior makes use of the same term, but not only does it not always make sense to the reader—as it is more often than not used as a synonym

of 'beautiful', or 'picturesque' it also saturates the text, sometimes emptying the very word of its meaning. Collins's obsessive use of the "sublime" in the first part of *Antonina* stifles the descriptions: misty Rome, at dawn, "presented a vast combination of objects —a gloomy conjunction of the menacing and the *sublime*"; the Mausoleum of Augustus," towering proudly up into the brilliant sky (...) stands solitary and *sublime*"; "The beauties of this atmospheric effect were of far too serious and *sublime* a nature"[13].

9 A certain form of heaviness in his style is also attributable to the conventions of the genre he chooses and which do not match his usual way of writing. The traditional warning to contemporary readers that historical novels usually display is indeed not very subtly handled by Collins, whose parallels between (Chartist) London and (decadent) Rome seem quite artificial:

> In a line with this house, but separated from it by a short space, stood a long row of buildings, let out floor by floor to separate occupants, and towering to an unwieldy altitude; for in ancient Rome, as in modern London, in consequence of the high price of land in an over-populated city, builders could only secure space in a dwelling by adding inconveniently to its height (141).

10 Similarly, if this architectural parallel is neither necessary to the plot nor stylistically skillful, it leads to a hackneyed sense of social analysis, here applied to an ailing Rome and, by extension, Victorian London:

> Slaves in their season of servitude, masters in their hours of recreation, they presented, as a class, one of the most amazing social anomalies ever existing in any nation; and formed, in their dangerous and artificial position, one of the most important of the internal causes of the downfall of Rome (23).

11 However, as the writing goes on and the first third of the novel ends, the influence of his father and forefathers fades away and decadent Rome offers his young sensational imagination a formidable canvas on which to project his Gothic fantasies.

Rome as a Fresh Corpse

12 Decadent Rome is transmogrified into a putrescent and organically repellant Ancient city, oozing, swelling and rotting as if its inhabitants and their vices had been absorbed or digested by Nature. One of the most haunting descriptions of the novel is that of the crumbling wall surrounding Rome: "The Crooked Wall". Ulpius finds a cavity into it and endeavours to widen it so that he may go through. As he crushes the bricks with a spike and his hands, Ulpius's strange propensity to dissolve whatever his body touches more than his action itself seem to transform the world around him. The bricks fall one by one and the whole structure sinks into its own decaying matter:

> He had already made a cavity, in an oblique direction, large enough to creep through, and was preparing to penetrate still further, when a portion of the rotten material of the interior of the wall suddenly yielded in a mass to a chance pressure of his iron bar, and slowly sunk down inwards into a bed which, judging by such faint sounds as were audible at the moment, must have been partly water, and partly marshy earth and rotten brick-work (81).

13 The very base of Rome is thus described as festering and giving rise to a swarming mass of slimy creatures of which "reptile-like" (111) Ulpius becomes a specimen: "He could feel toads and noisome animals crawling over his limbs. The damp atmosphere of the place began to thrill through him to his very bones." (82) Collins here indicates an exchange of substance between the man and his immediate environment, as if one

influenced the other in a never-ending cycle, condemning each other to rottenness and decay. The damp of the walls propagate into his body, "thrill(ing) him to his very bones", as Ulpius had once been distorted and deformed by the stench of other walls, that of his cell in Alexandria:

> The effluvia exhaled from the copper ore in which he had been buried for twelve years had not only withered the flesh upon his bones, but had imparted to its surface a livid hue, almost death-like in its dullness. His limbs, wasted by age and distorted by suffering, bent and trembled beneath him; and his form, once so majestic in its noble proportions, was now so crooked and misshapen, that whoever beheld him could only have imagined that he must have been deformed from his birth (49).

14 This representation of mutual contamination giving rise to monstrous life forms—mould, frogs—is much more Victorian than it is classical as Collins is here staging the miasmatic theory of the time. The Victorians believed that contamination was the product of "bad air"; that same miasma which Dickens famously stages, in a putrescent London at the outset of 1851 *Bleak House*[14], baptized "the Great Stink", in 1855, when cholera spread over the capital as fast as the smells of rotten matter and putrefied water were carried by the hot winds of summer[15]. Indeed, Ulpius's frame which had once been soaked in the stench of decomposing walls is able to dissolve solid rock. His vicious mind can distort his conception of reality—a very organic and effective way of describing the source of his religious fanaticism[16]. The decadence of Rome thus becomes actual dissolution, its protective and noble walls literally melting away into misty layers:

> A thick vapour lay over the lonely and marshy spot. Nothing was now visible from it but the dim, uncertain outline of the palaces above, and the mass, so sunk in obscurity that it looked like a dark layer of mist itself, of the rifted fortifications. A smile of exultation passed over the Pagan's countenance, as he perceived the shrouding and welcome thickness of the atmosphere (81).

15 The walls are losing body, liquefying into ominously "shrouding" mist. This process is linked to the wasting away not only of Ulpius's once human-looking frame but of the Roman people's virile bodies. Romans have dissolved their manhood into vice, becoming too effeminate, too narrow and too weak for their armours. Gothic King Alaric chooses to kill the Romans, not by fighting them like men but by letting them shrivel and die like the half-human creatures they have become:

> "Think you, renegade, that your city could have resisted me had I chosen to storm it on the first day when I encamped before its walls? Know you that your effeminate soldiery have laid aside the armour of their ancestors, because their puny bodies are too feeble to bear its weight, and that the half of my army here trebles the whole number of the guards of Rome?"(110).

16 Collins uses the traditional vision of Roman decadence and Greek grandeur by further depicting the Goths as the new Athenian warrior[17] set against the effeminate and weak Roman soldiers:

> "I can look on your great stature, and heavy sword, and bright armour (...). You are not like the soldiers of Rome;—you are taller, stronger, more gloriously arrayed! You are like a statue I once saw by chance of a warrior of the Greeks! You have a look of conquest and a presence of command!'"(70).

17 The Roman emperor, on the contrary, is animalized and ridiculed by Collins who further emphasizes the rotting away of Roman culture by depicting the regression of Honorius. Reduced to one of the lesser members of the animal world, he falls

dramatically down the scale of existence[18]. The Roman Head of State's debilitated figure is just another chicken among the poultry he feeds inside his own Palace, a shameful shadow of Rome's past grandeur:

> In the midst of a large flock of poultry, which seemed strangely misplaced on a floor of marble and under a gilded roof, stood a pale, thin, debilitated youth, magnificently clothed, and holding in his hand a silver vase filled with grain, which he ever and anon distributed to the cackling multitude at his feet. Nothing could be more pitiably effeminate than the appearance of this young man. His eyes were heavy and vacant, his forehead low and retiring, his cheeks sallow, and his form curved as if with a premature old age.(...) this feeder of chickens was no less a person than Honorius, Emperor of Rome (12).

18 Collins is suggesting here that poultry in a Roman palace is as incongruous as the new decadent life form Romans now embody. "A flock of geniuses"(13) swarm into the marble-floored palace to replace "the flock of poultry", thus showing that along with the virility or even humanity of the Romans, the noble virtues of Roman art and philosophy have also faded away: "the emperor [...] cast his languid eyes over objects of art for which he had no admiration, and open[ed] his unwilling ears to panegyrical orations for which he had no comprehension"(13).

19 Collins highlights this contrast between a glorious past and a decadent present by setting two portraits of Senator Vetrino one against the other. A lengthy description of Vetrino's palace is offered after a banquet, an evening of debauchery during which the Senator served extravagant dishes of roasted peacock with nightingale sauce. Tired and drunk, Vetrino has fallen asleep on a couch:

> Immediately above the sleeping senator hung his portrait, in which he was modestly represented as rising by the assistance of Minerva to the top of Parnassus, the nine Muses standing round him rejoicing (52).

20 The contrast between the real model and his haughty representation underlines what Collins elsewhere describes as the "perversion", the "exhaustion" which Roman art has undergone[19]. Ventrino is a parody of Roman magnificence. He later appears as a grotesque version of Orpheus as he tries to seduce Antonina. Vetrino uses a luth to attract Antonina, who has been deprived of any form of earthly pleasure by her fanatic father, be it listening to music or practicing the arts. Entranced by the sound of the instrument her father cannot hear, Antonina escapes from the prison-like house her father has trapped her into and meets Vetrino in his garden at night, in the same way Orpheus had come to rescue Eurydice away from the underworld. But the slight change from lyre to luth leads to the wider metamorphosis of Orpheus into a rapist. The young girl is turned into the helpless victim. She is freed from the Inferno to enter new circles of Hell (after being banned from Rome, she escapes murder twice, reenters Rome and starves just before being stabbed in the throat). Antonina, the classical character embodying Roman beauty and purity, slowly mutates into the heroine of a Gothic novel, as *Antonina* itself shifts from a historical and pictorial work to a sensational piece of fiction.

Gothicising the Roman Body

21 *Antonina* is indeed a Gothic novel. It stages actual Goths whose besieging of the Romans can also be read as a meta-textual commentary on the way Collins has chosen to transform the Roman model and gothicise the Roman body. Antonina herself *embodies*

this change. Goisvintha "*embodies*[20] suspicion", if not distortion, all the while bearing the physical signs of madness and revenge[21]. Antonina often swoons in the novel, and her marble-like body is that of a perfectly preserved statue:

> The tattered robe that had hitherto enveloped the fugitive had fallen back, and disclosed the white dress, which was the only other garment she wore. Her face, throat, and arms, had been turned, by exposure to the cold, to the pure whiteness of marble. Her eyes were closed, and her small, delicate features were locked in a rigid repose. But for her deep black hair, which heightened the ghastly aspect of her face, she might have been mistaken, as she lay in the woman's arms, for an exquisitely chiseled statue of youth in death! (67).

22 By superimposing death to beauty, Thanatos to Eros, Collins gently slides from the classical to the gothic, as he eroticizes the martyr's last pangs of physical and moral suffering, only to deconstruct the Classical ideal of a marble-white skin, here tainted by the drama of a Gothic death:

> The girl's eyes were closed; her lips were parted in the languor of suffering; one of her hands lay listless on her father's knee. A slight expression of pain, melancholy in its very slightness, appeared on her pale face, and occasionally a long-drawn, quivering breath escaped her—nature's last touching utterance of its own feebleness! (187).

23 However, Collins treats Antonina's body with a tenderness he absolutely denies to the rest of his characters. He transforms mythological figures into Gothic monsters. The transformation is either moral, with Vetrino becoming a lustful Orpheus, or physical. Indeed, Collins delights in "deform[ing] Hercules" as he devises two terrifying parodies of Herculean bodies:

> A flat nose, a swarthy complexion, long, coarse, tangled locks of deep black hair, a beardless, retreating chin, and small, savage, sunken eyes, gave a character almost bestial to this man's physiognomy. His broad, brawny shoulders overhung a form that was as low in stature as it was athletic in build; you looked on him and saw the sinews of a giant strung in the body of a dwarf. And yet this deformed Hercules was no solitary error of Nature—no extraordinary exception to his fellow-beings, but the actual type of a whole race, stunted and repulsive as himself. He was a Hun (113).

24 This Herculean Hun eventually kills Hermanric, the embodiment of Greek grandeur, as thwarted Romans once defeated the great Athenians. The parallel between the Huns and the Romans is made more explicit by Collins himself, who stages his second "deformed Hercules" later in the novel, under the dreadful appearance of Reburrus, Vetrino's Fool, "hump-backed" and "gaunt", "repulsively disproportioned"(143).

25 Fear and horror become the main ingredients in *Antonina*. Collins seems to revel in the accumulation of gory and repulsive details to shock the reader (he himself used to terrify his aunt by reading Ann Radcliffe's novels to her[22]). In the second half of the novel, where his peculiar voice, like Scott's, is to be heard more distinctly, Bulwer-Lytton or his father's voices are, on the contrary, fading away. He therefore takes great pleasure in rewriting his first scenes. The decadent banquet turns into a horror scene: "The Banquet of Famine" (chapter 22). Outside the palace, the red glow of the sun reveals a stage saturated with starving women and men, moaning or crying, with "a dull, regular, beating sound, produced by those who had found dry bones on their road to the palace, and were pounding them on the pavement, in sheltered places, for food" (142). The cannibalistic hint here is taken one step further when the reader is led inside the palace, where "a dead boy [is] lying across the festal table" (148). Food has been

replaced by wine in one last Bacchanal where dead bodies are hung over the long table. However, despite the Roman's efforts, the stench of death cannot but creep into the reader's nostrils:

> Any repulsive odour which might have arisen from this strange compound was overpowered by the various perfumes sprinkled about the room, which, mingling with the hot breezes wafted through the windows from the street, produced an atmosphere as oppressive and debilitating, in spite of its artificial allurements to the sense of smell, as the air of a dungeon or the vapours of a marsh (143).

26 Very often does Collins hint at sensations in order to play with the reader's supposed reactions, betting on his disgust as a cause for interruption: "To describe the odours exhaled by the heat from this seething mixture of many pollutions, would be to force the reader to close the book" (23).

27 Little by little, the reader is made to feel, smell or taste decadent Rome, as pictorial techniques slowly give way to theatricality. The "opus rectilatum", where History is told through many details, bends into "the Crooked Wall" and, in the end, transforms into the perfect scenery for Ulpius's entrance on the field occupied by the Goths. Nature provides natural dramatic light to the whole scene, as a violent thunderstorm illuminates the "fitfully apparent" wall. Hermanric watches "his heart [throb]", transfixed with the appearance of "the figure of a man". Ulpius's motions are fragmented by lightning and darkness swallows him before Hermanric's eyes:

> Every pulse in the body of the Goth seemed to pause as he stood, with ready weapon, looking into the gloomy darkness, and wafting for the next flash. It came, and displayed to him the man's fierce eyes glaring steadily down upon his face; another gleam, and he beheld his haggard finger placed upon his lip in token of silence; a third, and he saw the arm of the figure pointing towards the plain behind him; and then in the darkness that followed, a hot breath played upon his ear, and a voice whispered to him, through a pause in the rolling of the thunder—'Follow me.' (106).

28 The landscape serves as a prop and Ulpius's state of mind once again changes his surroundings, as if lightning in this scene and the staccato movements of the character mimicked the state of his health in the following scene. Mental lightning seems to force Ulpius into fretful pauses and frightful convulsions:

> The man's parched lips moved, opened, quivered; his wild, hollow eyes brightened till they absolutely gleamed, but he seemed incapable of uttering a word; his features became horribly convulsed, the foam gathered about his lips, he staggered forward and would have fallen to the ground, had not the king instantly caught him in his strong grasp, and placed him on the wooden chest that he had hitherto occupied himself (108)[23].

29 The organic link between landscape and character is further highlighted by the very different descriptions of yet the same geographical spot—the entrance into Goth territory beyond the wall. Lightning reveals the dramatic presence of a "reptile-like" Ulpius and gives way to the wan but equally melodramatic glow of the moon on Antonina. The scene is here again structured around Hermanric's own vision:

> The moon had arisen and dispelled the mists (...). He had been thus occupied but a short time, when he thought he discerned a human figure moving slowly over a spot of partially lightened and hilly ground, at a short distance from him. (...) He looked again. The figure still advanced, but at too great a distance to allow him a chance of discovering, in the uncertain light around him, either its nation, its sex, or its age. (...) He again directed his attention—with an excess of anxiety which he could hardly account for—in the direction where he had first beheld it, but it was

> no more to be seen. It had either retired to concealment, or was now still advancing towards his tent through a clump of trees that clothed the descent of the hill. Silently and patiently he continued to look forth over the landscape; and still no living thing was to be seen. At length, just as he began to doubt whether his senses had not deceived him, the fugitive figure suddenly appeared from the trees, hurried with wavering gait over the patch of low, damp ground that still separated it from the young Goth, gained his tent, and then with a feeble cry fell helplessly upon the earth at his feet (65).

30 Antonina and the moon light had already been associated when the young woman was first introduced to the reader, her marble-like body flickering in the light, her somewhat unreal gait meant to stand out against the glow of the moon:

> Soon this solitary form approaches nearer to the eye. The moonbeams, that have hitherto shone only upon the window, now illuminate other objects. First they display a small, white arm; then a light, simple robe; then a fair, graceful neck; and finally a bright, youthful, innocent face, directed steadfastly towards the wide moon-brightened prospect of the distant mountains (35).

31 Landscapes become mindscapes, as the novel unfolds. Collins might as well be commenting upon this technique himself, as he directly addresses the reader: "We have now, so to express it, exhibited the frame surrounding the moving picture, which we shall next attempt to present to the reader by mixing with the multitude before the palace gates" (22). The pictorial reference to his father's art ("frame") gives way to a world filled with Drama ("the moving picture") and Sensation ("mixing with the multitude"), two ingredients which define Collins's style.

32 In many ways, *Antonina* can be read as a schizophrenic novel where two voices are intertwined—that of Collins's past (his readings on Classical Rome and his own memories of Italy as a boy) and that of his future creative writing, maybe made to be more distinctly heard. Ancient Rome becomes the stage of an inner struggle for young Collins who feels torn between his debt to the past and his natural propensity to go forward or, more accurately, sideways. There is a general movement from the outside to the inside, from landscape to mindscape, from the sources of others' to Collins's own fictional universe. *Antonina* is unique in terms of scenery and genre in Collins's work. However, Rome and classical references are, like Ulpius's identity, "distorted rather than utterly destroyed" (123). The act of maiming Herculean figures, for instance, became one of Collins's favourite techniques in the creation of his later characters. Mutilated (or cut in half, like Miserimus Dexter in *The Law and the Lady*, "the half of a man", perfectly built but in need of lower limbs[24]). The Roman ideal of the male body serves as satirical material for Collins, since the novelist often uses classical ideals to ridicule the British obsession with health and appearance: in *Hide and Seek*[25], the character of Zack is a model for a classical painter and the even more famous Geoffrey Delamayn is otherwise known as "Hercules I" in *Man and Wife*. Delamayn becomes a stereotypical and standardized version of British young men, obsessed like the Romans with sports and hygiene—a bad habit which seems to multiply (Hercules II, III and IV are also characters of the plot). He himself degenerates into a lethal growth since he ends up being strangled by a weak woman, the victim of a stroke because he has exhausted his body[26].Collins's Roman heritage therefore gives birth to a series of characters both gifted with outward beauty and crippled by one of the more invisible symptoms of Gothic deformity. In the same way the Goths destroy, Collins, who enjoys "painting", as a Senator tells Vetrino before the fatal siege, "from the inexhaustible reservoir of [Rome's] wounds" (16), metaphorically creates.

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NOTES

1. Henry James, « Miss Braddon », *The Nation*, 9 November 1865, p. 594.
2. *Antonina* was published in 1850. However, there is no recent edition of the novel. The British Library owns one copy (London: Sampson Low& sons), published in 1861, and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France does not own any copy. The novel is nonetheless easy to read online (http://

www.gutenberg.org/files/3606/3606-h/3606-h.htm). The present article refers to the volume edited by CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform (ISBN 1489549404) printed in May 2013.

3. *Iolani, or Tahiti as It Was, A Romance* was written in 1845 but was not published before 1999 as it was rejected by publishers at the time.

4. Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1781-89), London: John Murray 1776-1789.

5. Collins had read Walter Scott's *Waverley* (1814), and also used Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompei* (1834). See Catherine Peters, *The King of Inventors: a Life of Wilkie Collins*, London: Secker and Warburg, 1991.

6. Collins writes to Bentley in August 1849: "I have thought it probable that such a work might not inappropriately be offered to your inspection, while recent occurrences continue to direct public attention particularly on roman affairs". The general European revolutionary movement of 1848 had gained the Italian peninsula in March, and revolution roared from 1848 to 1849. See Tamar Heller, *Dead Secrets: Wilkie Collins and the Female Gothic*, New Haven (Conn.); London: Yale University Press, 1992, p. 40. Sue Lonoff also quotes the same passage of Collins's letter, linking the Italian events of 1848 to the Chartist movement in Britain in the 1830's. See Sue Lonoff. *Wilkie Collins and his Victorian readers, a study in the rhetoric of authorship*, New York: AMS Press corp., 1982, 65.

7. Catherine Peters explains: "The style, a combination of the antithetical Gibbonian sentence with flowery decorative flourishes taken from Bulwer Lytton is quite unlike anything Collins wrote." *King of Inventors*, p. 152.

8. Wilkie Collins, *Memoirs of the life of William Collins, with selections from his journals and correspondence, by his son W. Wilkie Collins*, London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1848.

9. See Catherine Peters, *Ibid*.

10. Describing the *Scene from the Caves of Ulysses, at Sorrento* 1841 for instance, Wilkie explains how the "smooth limpid sea tinged with the clear Italian reflections of the hour" as "gay market-boats" idly float on it, the water mirroring the tranquility and peace of the Italians, contrasting with the agony and pain in Naples at the very same time, under a quarantine for cholera.

11. Between 1834 and 1840, the Collins family sets off to Italy, to offer William Collins the opportunity to study Italian painters like Raphael and Michael Angelo and typical landscapes. The family is however retained longer than foreseen in Nice, because of the outbreak of cholera in Naples. Young Collins's imagination probably thus mingles, from the very outset, beautiful landscapes with disease and death. The painter's notes are widely used by Wilkie Collins in his *Memoirs* written in1848.

12. William Collins writes, on January the 22nd 1838 : "The most striking object I beheld was the Amphitheatre: the scenery around it is sublime, especially Vesuvius, whose original and beautiful shape was sacrificed to fulfil an act of Divine justice, in ending such scenes of cruelty and vice as existed in this profligate city ere it was destroyed.". Wilkie Collins, *Memoir*s, 120.

13. My emphasis.

14. Personified fog which tries to kill Londoners opens *Bleak House* and stands for the stench and smog threateningly invading London: "Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping into the cabooses of collier-brigs; fog lying out on the yards and hovering in the rigging of great ships; fog drooping on the gunwales of barges and small boats. Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners, wheezing by the firesides of their wards; fog in the stem and bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wrathful skipper, down in his close cabin; fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of his shivering little 'prentice boy on deck. Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog all

round them, as if they were up in a balloon and hanging in the misty clouds.", Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (1852-3), London: Everyman Dickens, 1994, p. 5.

15. "Miasmatic Theory", which was officially supported by the Board of Health and its head, Dr. William Farr, was challenged by John Snow's Germ theory. Snow thought that cholera was not carried by air but by water, the organic process still undiscovered. Roy Porter explains: "Miasmata" were atmospheric exhalations given off by stagnant ponds, rotting vegetable and animal matter, human waste, and all that was filthy and putrescent. Miasmatism seemed to explain why it was slum districts and the poor who were severely stricken by epidemies. With its palpable linking to soil, environment, atmosphere and sickness, miasmatism seemed scientific." ed. Roy Porter, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Medicine*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 142.

16. Collins elsewhere gives his own physical explanation of the distortion of reality undergone by fanatic like Ulpius or Numerian: "It is a peculiarity observable in the characters of men living under the ascendancy of one ruling idea, that they intuitively distort whatever attracts their attention in the outer world, into a connection more or less intimate with the single object of their mental contemplation."(80).

17. During the nineteenth century in Britain, Athens had become the symbol of superiority over decadent Rome. See Frank Turner, *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain* (London: Yale University Press, 1981).

18. In 1851, the Victorians built Cristal Palace where they exhibited British technical prodigies for the whole world to see. However, more than simply being an altar to progress and British grandeur, Cristal Palace was the counterpoint to two very deeply anchored Victorian fears : those of decay on the one hand, and regression on the other. And these two fears were to become all the more intense as they became realities as the century went on, first with the loss of authority in the British Empire, and then with the Darwinian theory of evolution which was to convince people that they were not much more than evolved apes.

19. Vetrino's banquet is adorned with "exhausted" allurements of luxury and the perverted creations of art which burdened the tables of the hall" (52).

20. My emphasis.

21. Goisvintha's body, like Ulpius's, have changed under the thwarting action of strong emotions, her body materializing her feelings: "Her tottering body, clothed in bear-skins, was bent forward over a large triangular shield of polished brass, on which she leant her lank, shrivelled arms. Her head shook with a tremulous, palsied action; a leer, half smile, half grimace, distended her withered lips and lightened her sunken eyes. Sinister, cringing, repulsive; her face livid with the reflection from the weapon that was her support, and her figure scarcely human in the rugged garments that encompassed its gaunt proportions, she seemed a deformity set up by evil spirits to mock the majesty of the human form—an embodied satire on all that is most deplorable in infirmity and most disgusting in age" (10). Collins uses bodies as white sheets on which violent mental changes are literally inscribed, or are erased, by Nature's command, as is the case for Antonina: "Already the short tranquilities of the present began to exert for her their effacing charm over the long agitations of the past. Despair was unnumbered among the emotions that grew round that child-like heart; shame, fear, and grief, however they might overshadow it for a time, left no taint of their presence on its bright, fine surface. Tender, perilously alive to sensation, strangely retentive of kindness as she was by nature, the very solitude to which she had been condemned had gifted her, young as she was, with a martyr's endurance of ill, and with a stoic's patience under pain". (70)

22. A letter from 1842 records his delight at reciting "the most terrible portions of The Monk and Frankenstein" to a horrified aunt and her family. (27) Mrs. Radcliffe was particularly central: Collins's mother, Harriet, was a great admirer of her work and copies of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Italian* were in her son's library.

23. Collins uses this efficient melodramatic way of revealing the real faces of his villains. In *Basil* for instance, in 1851, Mannion’s inner evil nature is suddenly imprinted on his otherwise unreadable mask-like face: “Strangely enough, at the moment when I addressed him, a flash came and seemed to pass right over his face. It gave such a hideously livid hue, such a spectral look of ghastliness and distortion to his features, that he absolutely seemed to be glaring and grinning on me like a fiend, in the one instant of the duration” ». Wilkie Collins, *Basil* (1852), Oxford: Oxford’s World Classics, 2000, p. 130.

24. Collins revels in the “startling” combination Nature, or more exactly his own imagination, creates. Miserimus Dexter, his first Latin name showing the world how tragic his life is, is such a proof of Nature’s errings : “Gliding, self-propelled in his chair on wheels, through the opening made for him among the crowd, a strange and startling creature—literally the half of a man—revealed himself to general view. A coverlid, which had been thrown over his chair, had fallen off during his progress through the throng. The loss of it exposed to the public curiosity the head, the arms and the trunk of a living human being: absolutely deprived of the lower limbs. [He was] an usually handsome and an unusually well-made man. His long silky hair, of a bright and beautiful chestnut colour, fell over shoulders that were the perfection of strength and grace. His face was bright with vivacity and intelligence. (...) Never had a magnificent head and body been more hopelessly ill-bestowed than in this instance!”.Wilkie Collins, *The Law and the Lady* (1875), London: Penguin Book, 1998, p. 163.

25. Zack is mentally cut into pieces by the painter, whose project “Hercules bringing to Eurystheus the Erymanthian boar” needs Zacks’s arm and chest, no more: “My classical figure composition, you know, is a glorious subject; and our friend’s arms, and, indeed, his chest, too, if he would kindly consent to sit for it, would make the very studies I most want for Hercules!”. Wilkie Collins, *Hide and Seek* (1854), Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 1999, p. 49.

26. Collins mocked the standards imposed upon health and bodies in both Victorian London and Classical Rome: “The manhood and muscle of England resemble the wool and mutton of England, in this respect, that there is about as much variety in a flock of athletes as in a flock of sheep. Julius looked about him, and saw the same man in the same dress, with the same health, strength, tone, tastes, habits, conversation, and pursuits, repeated infinitely in every part of the room. The din was deafening; the enthusiasm (to an uninitiated stranger) something at once hideous and terrifying to behold. Geoffrey had been lifted bodily on to the table, in his chair, so as to be visible to the whole room. They sang round him, they danced round him, they cheered round him, they swore round him. He was hailed, in maudlin terms of endearment, by grateful giants with tears in their eyes. "Dear old man!" "Glorious, noble, splendid, beautiful fellow!" They hugged him. They patted him on the back. They wrung his hands. They prodded and punched his muscles. They embraced the noble legs that were going to run the unexampled race. At the opposite end of the room, where it was physically impossible to get near the hero, the enthusiasm vented itself in feats of strength and acts of destruction. Hercules I. cleared a space with his elbows, and laid down—and Hercules II. took him up in his teeth. Hercules III. seized the poker from the fireplace, and broke it on his arm. Hercules IV. followed with the tongs, and shattered them on his neck.”Wilkie Collins, *Man and Wife* (1870), Oxford: Oxford World’s Classic, 1999, 182-3.

ABSTRACTS

Antonina, Wilkie Colins's second novel, seems to be one of a kind in the novelist's work who is known to be one of the Victorian masters of sensationalism. For one who, as Henry James once said, was most gifted to stage "those most mysterious of mysteries, the mysteries that are at our own doors[1] », Collins could not have chosen a more remote scenery for Antonina, both historically and geographically (Ancient Rome at the time of its siege by the Goths). And yet, despite its sometimes heavy, lengthy, even clumsy passages and its apparent and complete Otherness, this early novel is fascinating in what it offers its readers—the metamorphosis of young Collins into a powerful writer, and, more importantly, the very origins of what became his most successful sensational ingredients. Collinsian sensationalism seems to have been born from the metamorphosis of classical standards. Collins mistreats Roman bodies, maims, distorts, weakens, degenerates them, however not to destroy, but to recreate a brand new aesthetic conception of the body, one which prevails in all his later work. In Antonina, the Gothic replaces the Classical, the mental and intellectual relationship to the world becomes intensely physical and sensual, the historical novel slowly moulds itself into a sensational and gothic one, enabling Collins to find his own path.

Antonina est le second roman du jeune Wilkie Collins et semble inclassable dans l'œuvre de celui qui deviendra l'un des maîtres du roman à sensation victorien. Habitué à mettre en scène « ces plus mystérieux des mystères, ceux qui se jouent derrière les portes de nos propres maisons », Collins n'aurait pu choisir de scène plus éloignée des manoirs et maisons bourgeoises anglaises qui seront pourtant ses décors de prédilection. *Antonina* se passe en Rome Antique, au moment du siège de la capitale par les Goths. Cependant, malgré des pesanteurs dans le style et l'intrigue, Antonina est fascinant car il offre à son lecteur le spectacle de la genèse de tout ce qui fera le succès de Collins et les ingrédients principaux de ses romans à sensation. Le sensationnalisme du romancier trouve en effet son origine en ce qu'il malmène les standards classiques, s'appliquant à déformer, tronquer, torturer, affaiblir, dégénérer littéralement le corps romain pour lui donner la forme qu'il va revêtir dans ses romans futurs. Bien plus qu'une destruction de conventions du passé, ce roman est la naissance d'une esthétique nouvelle du corps, la métamorphose lente d'un roman historique au décor antique en un véritable roman victorien à sensation, le premier par Collins qui précède la venue de nombreux autres.

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Mots-clés: Rome Antique, Collins, roman victorien, le gothique, difformité, vestiges
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